DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 380 082 IR 017 003

AUTHOR Ma, Yan
TITLE A Reader-Response Analysis of "A Book from the Sky."
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 21p.; In: Imagery and Visual Literacy: Selected Readings from the Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (26th, Tempe, Arizona, October 12-16, 1994); see IR 016 977. Illustrations may not reproduce clearly.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age; *Art Criticism; Art Education; *Chinese; Cultural Influences; *Data Interpretation; Ethnicity; Foreign Countries; Imagery; Professional Occupations; *Reader Response; *Reader Text Relationship; Sex; Visual Arts; Visual Literacy
IDENTIFIERS *Book from the Sky (A); China; Gender Issues; United States

ABSTRACT

This study applies reader-response criticism to investigate subject positions of gender, age, ethnicity, and profession through the poststructural analysis of an art work entitled "A Book from the Sky," and examines the relationship among viewer, text (the art work), and artist. A description of the art work is provided as an introduction. The study's general concern is "What meanings do viewers with different ethnicity, gender, age, and profession construct from viewing this work of art?" The study compares the similarities and differences of the interpretations given by United States (novice) viewers and Chinese (expert) critics; ascertains the author's intention in making the "Book"; compares his intention with viewer reactions; and describes the codes in the "Book." An introduction to the Chinese language is provided, and the following language codes are defined: images; sounds; radicals; grammar. Three illustrations of the "Book" are provided. (Contains 39 references.) (MAS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 380 082

A Reader-Response Analysis of *A Book from the Sky*

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Yan Ma

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Alice Walker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

Introduction

This study applies reader-response criticism to investigate subject positions of gender, age, ethnicity, and profession through a poststructural analysis of an art work entitled *A Book from the Sky* (hereafter referred as *Book*). This study examines the relationship between and among viewer, text (the art work), and artist. It explores the relationships between and among subject positions of viewers, text, and historical moments of viewing, and investigates how the art work positioned viewers in the social change and meaning construction. Since the *Book* possesses political, social, and cultural values, the study is a postmodern educational enterprise. The study is also a contribution to postmodern art education. For the purpose of the study, both textual analysis and social science research methods, such as survey and interviews, were used.

Description of *A Book from the Sky*

In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin (1936) described a crisis that occurred in the late twentieth century. He warned that the originality or the "aura" of an art work had been lost because of mass production in the industrial society. The late twentieth century has witnessed the innovations of technology ranging from telephone networks, communication satellites, radar systems, programmable laser videodiscs, robots, biogenetically engineered cells, computer networks, rocket guidance systems and to artificial intelligence. Bill Nichols (1988) has carried Benjamin's inquiry forward as he describes the mass production in the age of cybernetics. The aura of a cultural product has been lost in mass production of copy machines, computers, etc. Although critiques of art works based on the ideas of Benjamin and Nichols have been carried out in the West, Eastern scholars have not articulated these ideas. An ambitious work of art, however, has appeared in China and it incorporates both of Benjamin's major topics, namely, the aura of an art work and the nature of mass reproduction with letterpress printing.

The art work is entitled *A Book from the Sky*. One copy of the *Book* consists of four volumes each 40 cm x 36 cm. The *Book*'s format resembles that of Chinese holy classics. The artist, Xu Bing, spent three years making the volumes. The characters in the *Book* are

IR017003

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

made up, designed, carved, and printed by the artist. They look like real words but they are not real words. The artist has created a totally "new" language, by combining traditional Chinese printing with book-making. He kept the aura of original art by creating more than four thousand individual "characters," the method of printing applied and the number of copies printed are related to the concept of mass production discussed in Benjamin's essay. The artist used letterpress printing to print one hundred and twenty copies of the *Book*. When it was exhibited, it was installed in three fashions: thread-bound books, ceiling draperies (an exaggerated form of a Chinese scroll), and wall hangings (an exaggerated form of Chinese painting on walls).

Artist Xu Bing, spent three years making these unrecognizable characters during the time when China was opening its door to the rest of the world; allowing the flow of Western ideas into China; accepting and rejecting ideas and philosophy of old and new, Eastern and Western, traditional and contemporary in a mixed condition. As Erickson (1991) pointed out, "denying the meaning of Chinese culture by deconstructing the written word has political overtones in itself. It echoes young Chinese intellectuals' frustration with a system of culture tightly constrained by the authorities and questions the validity of a civilization that could produce such a situation" (p. 12).

The appearance of the *Book* in China spurred reaction from art circles and other viewers as well as reactions from other countries in Asia. Viewers with different social, economic, political, educational, and cultural backgrounds reacted differently to this *Book*. The *Book* was praised highly and discussed heatedly in China before the Tiananmen Square incident on June 4th, 1989. From 1985 to 1989, there was a new trend in Chinese art which was labeled as the "New Wave of Fine Arts." Art works influenced by the New Wave were similar to Western art in style or conceptualization. After the June 4th incident, the government set a policy to control arts. The *Book* was criticized by some conservative critics as an example of the product of "bourgeois liberalization" during the "New Wave" (Yang, 1990).

The *Book* is deprived of the standard means of communication: reading. Though it is considered a book in its form and format, it resists reading. Because it resembles a real Chinese book, it invites viewers to read, understand, and interpret, but its characters are simply art forms. It was presented to a United States audience during the period from 30 November 1991 to 19 January 1992.

The *Book* is a challenge to viewers not only visually but also culturally. It challenges viewers to rethink the meaning of language and the relationship with its culture.

The general concern of this study is "What meanings do viewers with different ethnicity, age, gender, and profession construct from viewing this *Book*?". The study compares the similarities and differences of the interpretations given by United States viewers (novice viewers) and Chinese critics (expert viewers); ascertains the author's intention in making this *Book;* compares his intention with viewer reactions; and describes the codes in the

Book. Because the investigator has available only the critiques written by Chinese critics, these critiques are used for comparison.

Objective and Focus Questions

A number of focus questions are related to the objective of the study. Following are the objective and focus questions for the study:

Using reception theory to compare and contrast between and among the artist, the *Book* itself, and the viewers, the researcher asked the following focus questions:

1. What is the intention of the artist who created this *Book*?
2. What are the codes in the *Book*?
3. What meanings are constructed when viewers interact with this *Book*?
   3a. How do Chinese critics react to this *Book*?
   3b. How do the United States viewers react to this *Book*?
4. How do the Chinese critics' perception of the codes compare with the United States viewers' perception of the codes of the *Book*?
5. What are the similarities and differences between and among the intention of the artist and the interpretations of the Chinese critics and the United States viewers?
6. What are the similarities and differences of the interpretations generated by the United States viewers

from groups differing in gender, age, and profession?

Methodology

In order to examine the research questions stated earlier, a research design, which consists of personal interview, survey, and a poststructural analysis using reception theory to analyze collected data is developed.

Interviews are used to gather responses from viewers of the United States. Interviews are used to ascertain the intention of the artist who created the *Book*.

Survey is used in case there are more viewers than the investigator could handle at one time. A questionnaire is mailed only to those who have been to the show and whose gender and age group are known to the investigator in order to avoid sensitive questions. Therefore, this group of respondents are those whom the investigator personally knows.

Textual analysis is used in this study. It consists of the analyses of the text (i.e., the *Book*); the critiques of Chinese critics; the transcriptions of interview and questionnaire of novice viewers, and the artist interview transcription. Chinese characters are the symbols of Chinese culture. When the cultural symbols are deconstructed and reconstructed into familiar but new symbols, how do people of different ethnicity, age, gender, and profession construct meaning when they are interacting with these new symbols (in this case those in the *Book*)? As DeVaney (DeVaney & Elenes, 1990) pointed out "A post structural textual analysis has the power to answer questions about cultural meanings." Codes or syntax of the *Book* are analyzed because a close textual analysis is of primary importance to a further analysis of the relationship between and among text, reader and artist. The textual analysis of the *Book* consists of the

following elements: codes of Chinese language, codes of Chinese characters, codes of classic Chinese books, and codes of installation of the *Book*. These codes are used in analyzing expert viewers' critiques, novice viewers' interview and questionnaire transcriptions, and artist' interview transcription.

A Book from the Sky

The *Book* is a text in this study. Chinese characters are the symbols of Chinese culture. When the cultural symbols are deconstructed and reconstructed into familiar but new symbols, how do viewers of different ethnicity, age, gender, and profession create meaning when they are interacting with these new symbols (in this case the text)? In the following discussion, codes or syntax of the *Book* are analyzed because a close textual analysis is of primary importance to a further analysis of text, reader and artist. The textual analysis consists of the following elements: codes of Chinese language, codes of Chinese characters, codes of classic Chinese books, and codes of installation of the *Book*.

Introduction to Chinese Language. The Chinese language has a history of more than six thousand years (Zhen, 1983, p. 3). It is the oldest language still being used in the world today. Unlike other languages, Chinese language grows on itself without the influence from others. Chinese language uses images as the basis of a character to combine with sound and meaning. This combination forms an intricate and diversified language system. Since China has the highest population in the world and Chinese is the official language of the country, Chinese language is used by the greatest number of people. In addition, Japan is still using Chinese characters; Vietnam and Korea which formerly used Chinese characters, have kept some of the Chinese characters in their languages, making the population of Chinese language users even bigger. Because Chinese language is not a phonetic based language, it causes more difficulty in its use than do most of the languages in the world. Chinese characters consist of three parts: image, sound, and meaning.

Codes of Images. Chinese characters are constructed on the basis of the imitative symbols or the characters that carry imitative components. As an origin, a Chinese character is created based on an image of a real object. The system of Chinese characters is basically an ideographic one. "Because of the retention of the ideographic script, in China no conceptual separation occurred dividing writing from painting and the other arts. Calligraphy, in fact, had been 'the mother of Chinese pictorial art and always its ally'" (Miller, 1983, p. 44). As a result, Chinese language becomes the only language in the world that is an artistic language. Chinese characters remain in square shapes. The arrangements of components of each character are constructed in a square from top to bottom, from left to right, and from outside to inside.

The *Book* strictly follows this pattern of structures to create thousands of new characters. These retained structures in the newly invented characters attracts a Chinese reader to believe that they are real characters.

Codes of Sound. Chinese language is not a phonetic based language nor a language based on images alone. The special feature is its combination of sound and

image. This feature began even during the time of inscriptions on bones. More and more characters bearing this feature were added to the vocabulary. By the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), in the Kang Xi dictionary, there were about 49,030 characters which had the combination of phonetic and image occupying ninety-two percent of the total vocabulary (Zheng, 1983, p. 4). Since so many characters have phonetic components, the phonetics give clues to the sound of characters and the image provides the clues to the meanings.

The *Book* retains all the phonetic parts of Chinese characters, but newly invented characters do not carry the original meanings of the phonetic components. Thus, in appearance, they seem pronounceable but actually they are not.

Codes of Radicals. A Chinese character is put together by a number of strokes. Several strokes, when combined become character components or radicals, which themselves have specifically defined meanings. Radicals are the essence of Chinese language. They are originally individual, independent words. When a radical becomes a part of a new character, it carries its own meaning over to the new one, which is influenced by the meaning of the radical.

Codes of Grammar. Grammar is the system of structure in a language. Chinese grammar contains three basic units. They are words, phrases, and sentences. English grammar is characterized by the changes in verbs to indicate tense; and -s or -es or -ies to show plural. In English, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs have their distinctive features. For example, nouns have suffixes, such as -tion, -ness, -ism and so on; adjectives have suffixes such as -tive, -ful, -less and so on; and adverbs have suffixes such as -ly. However, in Chinese there are no such grammatical functions to differentiate the features of speech. The form of plural is reflected in measure words. The feature of possessive concepts, changes of tenses, and conditions of mood are characterized by the uses of auxiliary words which is "an unstressed form word that performs the grammatical functions of structure, tense, or mood (Department of English Language, Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, 1985, p. 917). Therefore, it is impossible to tell which word is a noun, an adjective, or a possessive noun in Chinese language without knowing the meanings of characters in a sentence. In other words, it is possible to create a fake English sentence with correct grammatical structure without retaining the meaning of individual words. For example, "This is a futication that was grotectically precuted." This made-up sentence invites reader to believe this is in English language simply because the English grammatical structure was retained. Though it is not possible to do this in Chinese, Chinese radicals, square-shaped, well constructed characters in real paragraphical arrangements, sentences arranged in book page formats provide the syntax patterns or codes of Chinese language. To arrange all the fake characters in book form, as was done in the *Book*, invites Chinese-speaking readers to read them. Therefore, the fashion by which the *Book* was presented adds another element for the analysis of the *Book* (Figure 1).

Traditional Chinese books are protectively covered in wood boards or in wood cases. The title is pasted on the

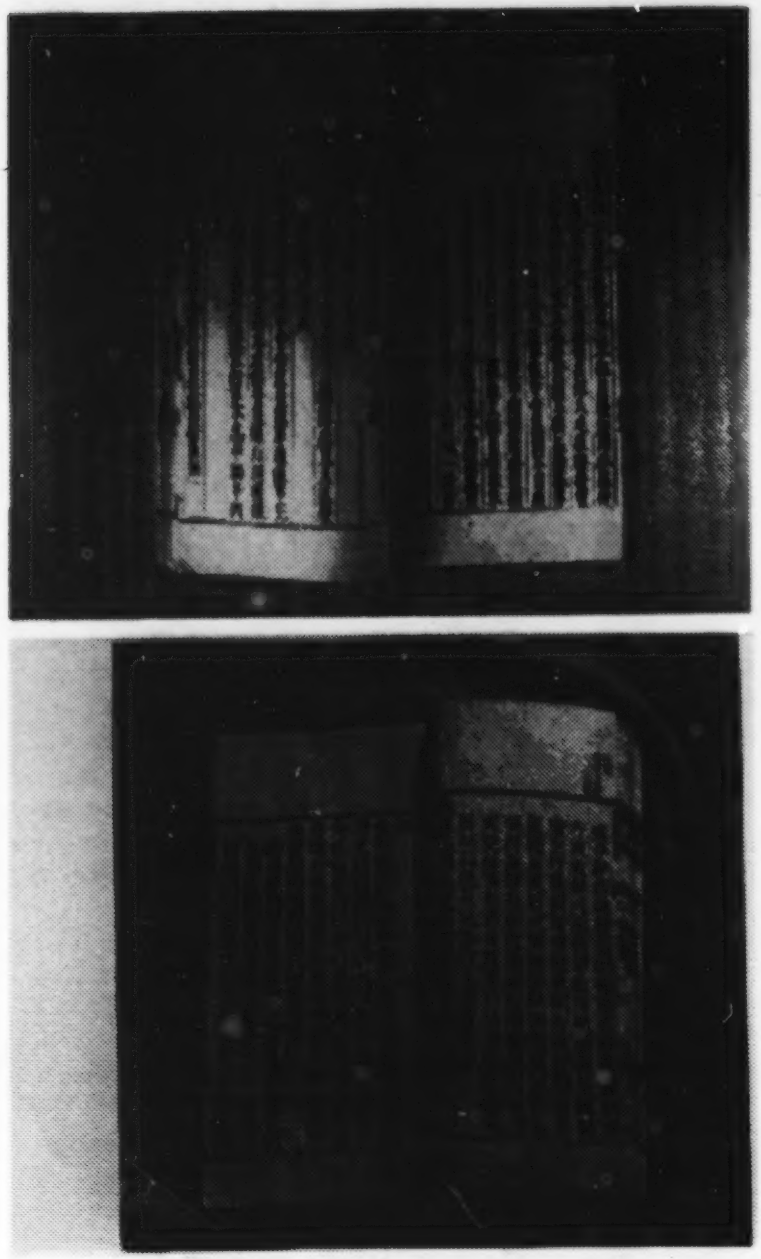


Figure 1

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

cover board. The whole *Book* was kept in a protective wood case (Figure 2 shows the comparison of an actual classic Chinese book covered in wood boards and the *Book* covered in its wood case). The binding of this *Book* is traditional Chinese stitched-binding style. Stitched-binding represents centuries of evolution in Chinese book-binding.

Codes of Installation of the Book. The installation of the exhibition was not a traditional one in terms of the usual exhibitions of Chinese prints. The whole installation consisted of three parts: three long, scroll-like strips were suspended or draped from the ceiling in a sweeping arc (Figure 3 shows the comparison of a Chinese scroll and the piece exhibited in the Museum); printed sheets of fake characters covered the walls from floor to ceiling; and hundreds of stitch-bound books in traditional Chinese classic format were laid open in rows on the floor with a number of wooden cases on either end of the rows. The main exhibition walls were black. To bind a book in a roll dates back to the earliest history of Chinese book-binding. Martinique (1983) indicated, "the first example of Chinese written literature to be found was the rolled or folded slips of bamboo and wood" (p. 65). Therefore, to a Chinese, a book in a roll signifies the traditional Chinese classics. To an American, it may seem to be a precious ancient document. The installation was open to the viewers' reactions.

In summary, the codes of Chinese language: images, sound, and meaning; phonetic components; radicals; structures of Chinese characters; Chinese grammar; form of the *Book*; and finally, installation of the *Book* are actually syntax patterns which may be called codes. A syntax pattern gets created by the conventions of production which are repeated daily. The syntax patterns or codes are culturally constructed. They need to be examined for paradigmatic meanings, which

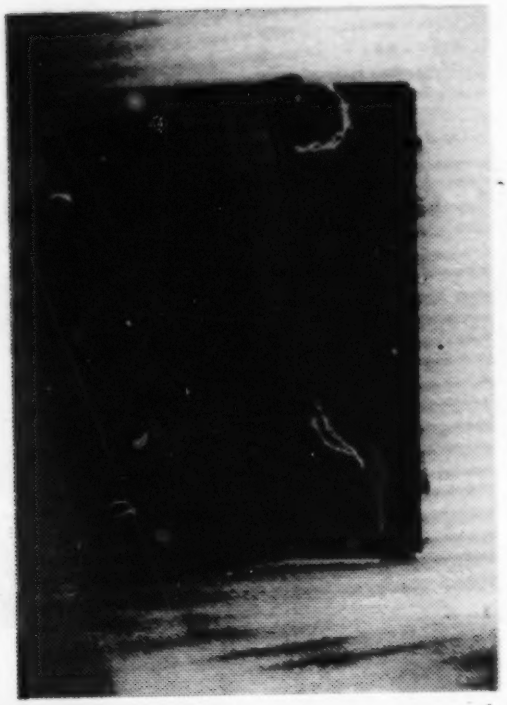
> supplied by syntax patterns or codes and readers can only work with codes with which they are familiar and they are only familiar with codes that come from the worlds or paradigms to which they have access or which they have experienced, in other words, their culture (DeVaney, 1991).

Expert Viewers' Critiques

Various critiques by Chinese critics are used for analysis. The codes in the *Book* are used to analyze the critiques of expert viewers in order to compare the similarities and differences with the interpretations of the *Book* of the United States viewers. The analysis also includes an examination of the expert viewers' readings of the *Book* at different historical moments. In addition, the analysis compares the similarities and differences between the artist's intentions and the expert viewers' reception of the *Book*.

Novice Viewers' Interview and Questionnaire Transcriptions

The data collected from United States viewers' interviews and survey are transcribed. The poststructural textual analysis consists of an examination of United States viewers' responses to the codes in the *Book*; comparisons of similar and different interpretations of the codes by United States viewers of different subject positions (i.e., age, gender, profession); and a comparison of United States viewers' responses toward the *Book* and those of Chinese critics.



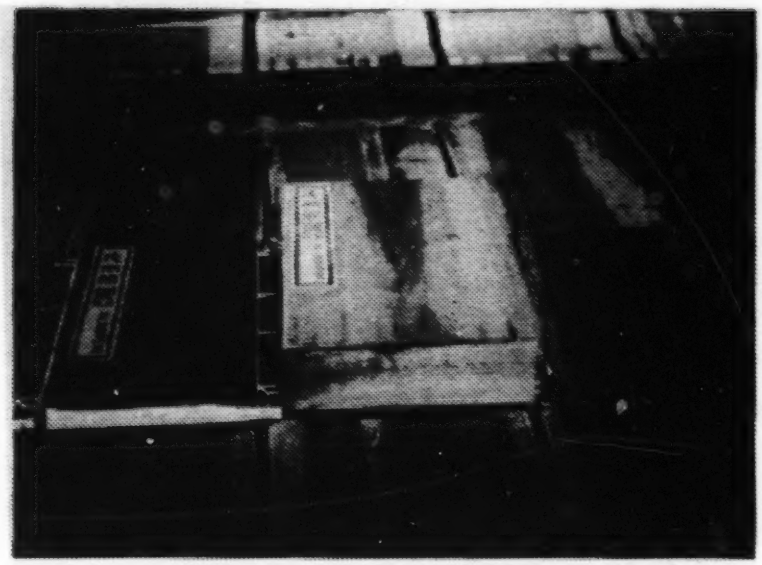
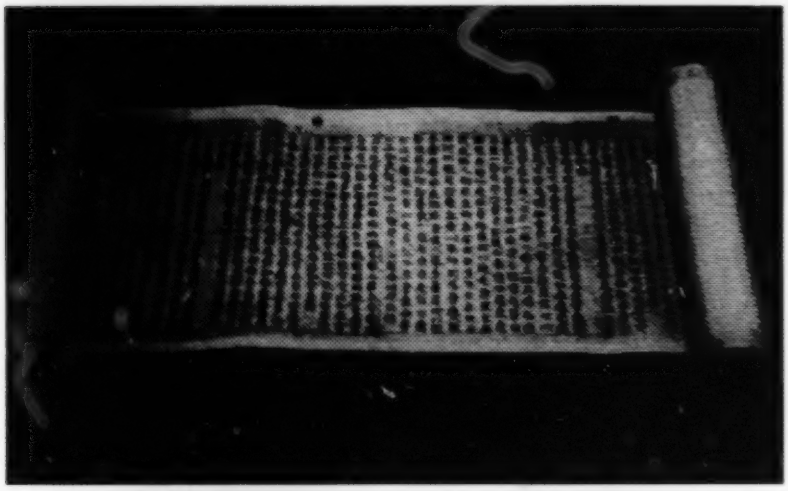


Figure 2

BEST COPY AVAILABLE



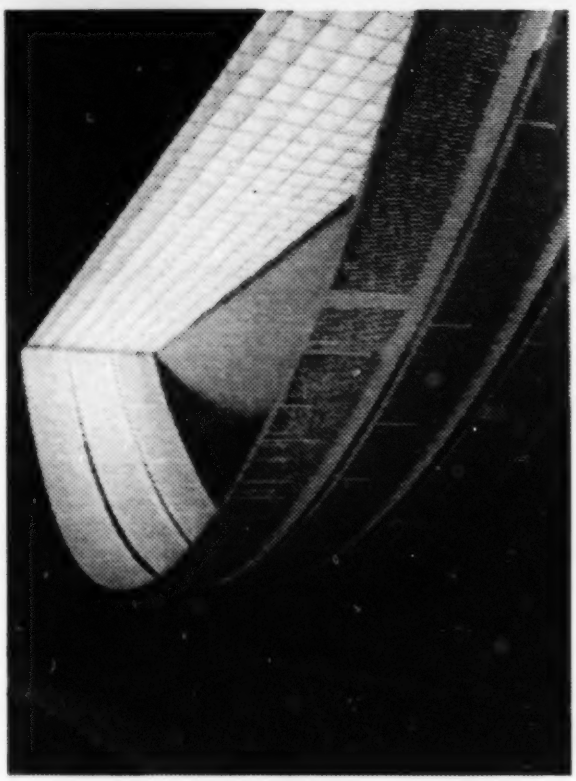


Figure 3

Interview Transcriptions of the Artist

A telephone interview and a videotaped interview with the artist were conducted. Transcriptions of the interviews are analyzed to compare the similarities and differences between the Chinese critics' interpretations and the artist's intentions. The same comparison is also made between the United States viewers and the artist.

Theoretical Foundation

Research on educational television and computer programs, applying reception theory, has been carried out recently. One example is an analysis of *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego*. Reception theory was used to examine the process of creating meaning while using an educational computer program (DeVaney, 1993, p. 182). By applying reception theory, researchers examined such issues as gender, ethnicity, and race. Art work is also a media text that can initiate interaction between and among the viewer, artist, and the art work itself; however, no research using reception theory has been done on art work. Therefore, DeVaney's model is adapted to carry out this research.

DeVaney's model is based on reception theory as shown in the works of Hans Robert Jauss, Roman Ingarden, Stanley Fish, and Wolfgang Iser (their works on reception theory, 1970, 1973, 1985, 1978, respectively). DeVaney emphasizes that a reader/viewer creates meaning when interacting with a media text that is coded and in which the author's intent is embedded (DeVaney, 1993). *Reading*, *text*, and *community of viewers*, the key concepts of reception theory, are defined in DeVaney's model. DeVaney also stresses that codes are socially and culturally constructed, shared, and communicated by the members of certain communities. Her model and these concepts serve as the theoretical and methodological foundations to investigate the interactions between and among viewer, artist, and art work.

Reader-response theory has its origin in the theories of literary criticism. Structuralist theorists believe that the meaning of a literary work resides only in the text (i.e., the text has coded messages given by the author). Though early writers Walker Gibson, Georges Poulet, Gerald Prince, and Michael Riffaterre, attempted to address the importance of the reader in the reading process, their views were still text-oriented (i.e. meaning is located in the text itself). Unlike the above structuralist theorists, "all reader-response critics focus on readers during the process of reading" (Mailloux, 1982, p. 20). Reader-response theory "replaces examinations of a text in-and-of-itself with discussions of the reading process, the 'interaction' of reader and text" (Mailloux, 1982, p. 2). It examines "the role actual readers play in the determination of literary meaning, the relation of reading conventions to textual interpretation, and the status of the reader itself" (Tompkins, 1980, p. ix).

Historically, Hans Robert Jauss represents the German phenomenological reception theory, which stresses the inseparable aspect of the reader and the text from a historical perspective. Though Jauss saw the relationships between author, text, and reader, he stated them in a historical connotation. A reader's position is related to the text from a present and historical point of view as well.

Different from Jauss, Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological reader theory focused on the reader's active participation in the production of textual meaning (Tompkins, 1980, p. xv). Iser (1978) pointed out that "reading is not a direct 'internalization,'" but a dynamic interaction between reader and text. Though Iser emphasizes the reader's participation in the reading process, he does not mention the social relations the individual reader possesses that influence the meaning creation process. To him, the reader is able to experience the meaning creating process provided by the text. To him, text and reader are still interdependent.

American reader-response theorist Stanley Fish departed from the phenomenological model of reader theory to a social model that has its belief in the social construction of knowledge. In his model "the reader was freed from the tyranny of the text and given the central role in the production of meaning" (Fish, 1980, p. 7). He also created the concept of "interpretive communities" in which the members share the assumed goals and purposes within the same community. Members in the same community would agree based on their common interests. By using his concept, an investigation can be conducted on how meanings are constructed while interacting with the *Book* by viewers of different age, gender, ethnicity, and profession. In other words, it answers such a question as "How does this community (group) of viewers react to the *Book* instead of "How does an individual viewer react to the *Book*?". In order to investigate the relationships between and among artist, viewer, and *Book* in the present study, Fish's American adaptation of reader-response theory has more power than the ones discussed earlier to carry out such an analysis. It allows an investigation of meaning making by viewers from different communities. All these theories, however, lack explanation of the individual reader's subjectivity, which influences the interpretations of the text.

One's subjectivity is created based on his/her social interactions or relations through society and language. Subjectivity is constructed on different social dimensions based on one's gender, age group, family, class, nationality, and ethnicity (Fiske, 1987). Thus, Fiske says that "subjectivity is the product of social relations, whereas individuality is seen as the product of nature, or biology" (Fiske, 1987, p. 49). Art works may or may not show subject positions directly, but the cultural codes embedded in the works are still envisioned by the viewers according to their different social and ideological identities such as gender, age, ethnicity, and profession. In short, "meanings are determined socially: that is, they are constructed out of the conjuncture of the text with the socially situated reader" (Fiske, 1987, p. 80).

Analysis

Since the objective of the study is to apply reception theory to compare and contrast and between and among the meanings constructed by viewers of groups differing in age, gender, ethnicity, and profession, the analysis begins with reader response analysis of the *Book*, which focuses on how readers interpret the *Book* according to the embedded codes and their subjectivity such as age, gender, profession, and ethnicity. As John Fiske pointed out that one's subjectivity is socially constructed. Seven types of subjectivity are identified: self,

gender, age-group, family, class, nation, and ethnicity (Fiske, 1987, p. 50). For the purpose of this study, subjectivity of age, gender, and ethnicity are selected, which are believed to have influence on viewers' interpretations of the *Book*. In addition, these three types of subjectivity are manageable in carrying out this research in terms of identifying them with the proposed research methodology. Because one's subjectivity is constructed based on his/her social relations, for this study, profession is also selected as one type of subjectivity. Profession, therefore, is defined as the identity of a viewer when he/she is being interviewed, for example, a student, a teacher, or a retired engineer. Viewers' social positions as reflected in their professions are believed to show their relationship with viewers' responses.

Codes described earlier provide access to the analysis of readers' responses. The interview questions are designed to obtain the viewers' reaction to the codes and their feelings about the art work. They are:

1. What feeling do you get when you look at this?
2. Do you like it?
3. What do you like about it? or What do you dislike about it?
4. What do you think this is?
   (the whole piece, the roll, the banner, and the language)
5. What does this (or those) remind you of?
6. What is your profession?

Observation, appreciation, impression, and interaction with an art work is often a matter of feelings. Feelings are an inseparable part of interpretation. Interpreting an art work is different from doing a scientific experiment in which feelings are separated from observations (Feldman, 1991, p. 412). When interpreting an art work, one is not looking for the causal relationship between the observations and the feelings, one is "looking for an idea that will connect his feelings to each other, and also connect them with the observations he has been making about the object" (Feldman, 1991, p. 412). Therefore, viewers' feelings, impressions, sensitivity, intuition, intelligence, and responses are important elements of interpretations.

Viewers expressed their emotional responses to the *Book* during the interviews and mail questionnaires. They used many different adjectives to describe their feelings. All the viewers indicated that they liked the *Book*. Five types of emotional reactions to this *Book* and its installation were predominant: viewers were awed and impressed by the efforts and massive amount of work the artist had done; they admired the beauty of the visual effect of the work; they agreed with the artist's concept of the futility of human efforts; they had feelings of being in a religious place; and weird feelings about what the artist accomplished. Because of the limited space for this paper, the details of the analysis of viewers' emotional responses will not be covered here. For further reading, read *A Reader-Response Analysis of "A Book from the Sky--A Postmodern Educational Enterprise* (Ma, 1993).

Conclusions

Conclusions are drawn from the analysis and highlight reception theory (which is the theoretical foundation for

the study); viewers' subjectivity and their responses; and intertexuality. It also discusses how this study contributes to the areas of reception theory, education, postmodern art, and Chinese art.

Historical Reading

From a historical perspective, according to reception theorist Hans Jauss, each reading at different moments of time produces different meaning. He believed that "the historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of the addressees" (p. 19). The analysis showed two readings of the *Book* by Chinese critics at different historical periods resulting in different interpretations. The first reading happened before 4 June 1989 when the atmosphere for creativity in art and literature was open and liberal and when the influence of Western cultures was strong. Artists interested in postmodern concepts created their works in styles similar to those seen in the Western countries. When the *Book* was exhibited in late 1988 and early 1989 in China, positive reviews and critiques appeared in magazines and newspapers. The *Book* was once considered as "one of the most representative works since the New Wave of Fine Arts in 1985" (Lin, 1990). After the Tiananmen Square incident on 4 June 1989 when the student movement was crushed, the Chinese government's control of arts was restored to preserve socialist principles for fine arts. Articles of negative criticism appeared in different journals and newspapers. The criticism targets on the purpose of the art work that failed to serve the Chinese reality but followed the Western philosophy and artistic outlook.

Reader's Construction of Meaning

American reception theorist Stanley Fish believed in the social construction of knowledge. In his version of reception theory, "the reader was freed from the tyranny of the text and given the central role in the production of meaning" (Fish, 1980, p. 7). When talking about Fish, Jane Tompkins (1980) pointed out that "meaning is not something one extracts from a poem, like a nut from a shell, but an experience one has in the course of reading" (p. xvi). Reading is then defined in this study as the process of creating meaning when viewing *A Book from the Sky*. The *Book* is a communication that has been encoded by socially constructed signs and symbols that remain dormant until they are received by the viewer. It is the viewer who creates the meaning (DeVaney, 1990, p. 5). Stanley Fish also created the concepts of interpretive strategies, which are shaped by the readings of interpretive communities. Members' interpretations often agree because of their membership in the same community. But a reader's "subjectivity is the product of social relations" (Fiske, 1987, p. 49).

Meanings constructed by different age groups

The analysis showed that viewers of very young or old ages did not comment much on the codes. Viewers between the ages of thirty-one and forty-five not only made up the largest age group in number of interviewees, but also their interpretations were the most diverse. They related the *Book* to Chinese culture, Chinese language, and ancient culture. They also compared the draped piece on display to banners and newspapers; the piece pasted on the walls to the Vietnam War Memorial, microchip data, information; the books on the floor to waves, ripples, water; the exhibition environment to libraries, theater, and

universe; the type of art to Dada, Duchamp, conceptual art, history, communication, interpretation, and Zen spirit.

Age does seem to affect the construction of meaning. One extreme is that a viewer of very young or old age is unable to relate much of his/her social position to the text. It is also clear that meanings made by viewers aged between thirty-one to forty-five are more diverse. Their interpretations represent a spectrum of meanings at different intellectual, social, cultural, and other levels. One conclusion is that the closer one's age is with that of the members in an age group, the more likely one's interpretation of the *Book* is to agree with meanings made by the members in same age group. Except this conclusion, the other conclusions about age cannot be generalized but it is safe to say that age is an important element in construction of meaning.

Meanings constructed by different gender groups

Just as the conclusions about age cannot be generalized, neither can the conclusions about gender, but it is interesting to note the role of gender played in the reading of the *Book*. The analysis shows that more female viewers expressed their feelings of visual beauty of the *Book* and they showed more admiration for the wholeness of the piece and the efforts the artist put into it than did male viewers. More male viewers were interested in the concept of "futility of human endeavor." It is extremely important not to generalize these statements about gender. Essentializing positions are counterproductive. Suffice it to say that the male and female responses here are unique to this study.

In interpretations of the codes of Chinese scrolls in relation to the draped piece in the museum, more male viewers expressed their thoughts. They compared the draped piece to banners, newspapers, ocean waves, window-dressing, something coming to the earth and from the sky. Fewer female viewers commented on the comparison. When both gender groups interpreted the codes of Chinese paintings, which are the sheets pasted on the walls, interpretations of male viewers differed greatly from those of female viewers. Male viewers interpreted the sheets pasted on the wall as reminders of the Vietnam War Memorial, ROM code for a computer, and libraries. Female viewers interpreted the sheets pasted on the walls as wall papers, patterns, statements on bathroom walls, and catalogs and information. These findings show that these viewers constructed meaning based on things they deal with daily, their observations, and experiences in their lives.

Meanings constructed by viewers of different professions

The analysis shows profession, one of the social relations in one's life, influences one's construction of meaning when viewing the *Book*. Artists related their interpretations to their world of learning, knowledge, history, philosophy, and practice. The *Book* was considered as conceptual art, Dada movement art, Zen philosophy, theater, movies, and so on. A teacher related his interpretation of the exhibition to libraries, which he thought was important in a learning environment. A scientist associated the process of making this *Book* to his science training process. A technician connected her interpretations to catalogs and information. And a house wife interpreted the sheets of faked characters

on the walls as wall paper. These interpretations demonstrate the influence of viewers' social relations on their meaning making processes. Their social relations play a role in their construction of meanings. They do not rely on the text to extract meaning out of itself, but create meaning related to their profession. Viewers of the same profession often tend to agree on their interpretations.

Text

In this study, text has two meanings. The first is the physical mass of the fake characters and the *Book* itself. Though the characters do not bear any meaning or sound, the *Book* is a communication carrying socially and culturally encoded messages, which may be understood and interpreted by viewers in various ways. The findings of the study show that viewers interpreted the text based on their subjective positions. The other meaning of the "text" is the constructed meanings by viewers of the same subjective positions. Viewers are drawing upon the discourses in which they are positioned to interpret the physical text. Discourses themselves, may be called texts "writ large."

Intertexuality

Intertexuality "suggests that certain meanings of one text are created only by the existence of related texts" (DeVaney, 1987, p. 6). It "calls attention to prior texts in the sense that it acknowledges that no text can have meaning without those prior texts, it is space where 'meanings' intersect" (Marshall, 1992, p. 128). The *Book* intertexualizes Chinese classic books, Chinese characters, Chinese language, traditional Chinese book-binding, Chinese prints, and other aspects of Chinese culture. How the viewers read the text depends on their knowledge of these other texts. The viewers exist "within the textuality" (Marshall, 1992, p. 136). The reader becomes a co-producer, a co-collaborator of a text or interpretation. The reader takes on shared responsibility for the text's "meaning" (Marshall, 1992, p. 135).

Drawing from different discourses, the readings of Chinese critics and United States viewers show great variation in their construction of meaning.

Meanings constructed by Chinese critics

When the Chinese critics read the *Book*, they located their meanings in Chinese culture, Chinese art, Chinese language, characters, Chinese prints, scrolls, calligraphy, the origin and relationship of Chinese painting and characters, arrangement of terra-cotta soldiers, Chinese language reform, typography, invention of printing, book-binding, Chinese society, and other aspects of Chinese culture and society. For example, critic Yin Ji-nan (1988) dated the printing process of the *Book* back to "the time when Bi Sheng invented typography around 1045, but the technique is now developed into a kind of unreadable modern print." Critic Wang Lin (1989) said, "these fake characters are arranged like terra-cotta soldiers of the Chin Dynasty." Critic Fang Zhou (1990) related the *Book* to the Chinese painting and traditional books. "From the point of view of a 'book,' it has the beauty of traditional thread binding and structure of characters; from the point of view of 'painting,' it also has the beauty of visual combination of abstract dots and lines." The critics agreed on the interpretations of the *Book* as Chinese book, characters, Chinese traditional binding, and other features of Chinese

characters and language.

Meanings constructed by United States viewers

The United States viewers read the *Book* to locate meanings in their culture as well. The codes in it invited them to read that with which they are familiar. They related the draped pieces in the exhibition hall as banners hanging or newspapers. They interpreted the sheets with fake characters pasted on the walls as reminders of the Vietnam War Memorial, wall paper, and statements made in public areas. They considered the *Book* as ancient culture.

The analysis shows that the *Book* intertexualizes many things both in Chinese culture and other cultures. It is the reader who takes the responsibility to locate prior texts to create meaning and write the text when interacting with it.

Artist

The analysis of the study shows that the shared cultural, social, political, and other positions of the artist and the viewers are the important factors that contribute to the interpretation of the intentions of the artist. Chinese critics not only agreed that the *Book* is intended to warn people that it is culture that restricts them, which is the intention of the artist, but also they understood the intended purpose of the special method of installation, which is to make the exhibition hall look like a dark prison of words or a sorrowful place. These well arranged, designed, and invented characters do attract Chinese-speaking viewers to believe that they are authentic characters. Because of the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the characters, Chinese critics studied the origin and relationship between Chinese paintings and characters and the impact of these authentic-looking but non-real characters on the practice of Chinese calligraphy.

The intentions of the artist were not well shared by United States viewers. It is impossible for them to have the real first-hand feel of the social, cultural, and political conditions in China when the *Book* was made. Because of the lack of the knowledge of these conditions, they interpreted the installation as a learning environment, a peaceful place, church, and universe, which are available in their culture, but not the intention of the artist. Though their interpretations did not match the intentions of the artist as they interpreted the codes in the *Book*, they created meanings of these codes out of the context in their own culture. For example, they compared the Chinese scroll as banners and newspapers and Chinese paintings hanging on the walls to Vietnam War Memorial and wall paper. These differences resulted from the differences in culture and society and other aspects.

Implications of the Study

This study provides us with a method to apply poststructural reader-response theory in the analysis of postmodern art as visual texts. Since postmodern art work is a visual text carrying embedded cultural codes which invite readers (viewers) to read them, the reading activity of the viewer is a process of producing the meaning of the visual text. The viewer is to finish the work meaning that a text is not complete until interacted with the viewer who "writes the text," (i.e., produces meaning of the text). Interpreting a visual text is not to be an

individual critic's own interpretation, rather, it is important to recognize the interpretation by a community of viewers who share the same subject positions. The study also contributes to the theory of art criticism in recognizing that it is impossible to understand postmodern art simply by looking at formal qualities as modern art critics did, because postmodern art is a mirror of current social, political, and cultural awareness; it is in many genres; it is a hybrid of multicultures; there are no country boundaries. This study is particularly valuable during "a period of particular crisis in art criticism" (Wallis, 1984, p. xi).

In addition, this study gives us a better understanding of contemporary art in China. From the years of 1985 to 1989, Chinese art began to reflect social, political, cultural, and other values. It is different from art in those stages of Chinese history when content determined form and form served content. The purpose of art then was for the socialist cause.

Through a poststructural textual analysis of the *Book* and the subject positioning of the viewers, the study not only contributes to the understanding of the nature of language, meaning construction, and its relationship between socially positioned reader, but also to the understanding of subjectivity, which is socially produced. The study provides teachers and students with an opportunity to be in an open classroom to critically view this visual text from political, social, and cultural nuances. *A Book from the Sky*, therefore, possesses educational value. It not only educates the viewers about the social, political, and aesthetic qualities of the work itself and but also about the background and conditions of China.

Postmodern theory of art stresses that art is a cultural expression. "Art is a collective communication about the experience of life in a particular culture" (Grieder, 1985, p. 8). The embedded cultural codes in the *Book* indicate strong cultural expressions. A postmodern art education approach not only recognizes the learning of self-expression techniques but also regulating power of social forces (Parks, 1989, p. 13). Thus, education in postmodern era is not classroom-bound in a traditional sense. *A Book from the Sky* provides viewers with an opportunity to confront with cultural images, issues, and ambiguities. The *Book* can also be regarded as a medium that facilitated liberatory education from a point of view of critical pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1987, p. 33). Viewing and interacting with the *Book* to create meanings is an educational experience in a museum, which might be called an open classroom. This open classroom provided viewers or students with the opportunity to reflect on their subject positions and critically view this visual text with political, cultural, and artistic nuances. The experience of viewing the *Book* provided students with an opportunity to confront visual images from a different culture and to engage issues related to that culture, which were embedded in the images. In addition, this study offers an awareness of how global advances in communications and technology have changed Chinese art and created art without boundaries. In this respect, the *Book* serves as a postmodern educational vehicle to mix art with technology.

References

Benjamin, W. (1968). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In Benjamin, W. (Ed.), *Illuminations*, (pp. 217-251). New York: Schocken Books.

Burnham, J. (1987). *Beyond modern sculpture: The effects of science and technology on the sculpture of this century*. New York: George Braziller.

De Vaney, A. (1987). *Reader theories and educational media analysis* (ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED 285 526)

De Vaney, A., & Elenes (1990). *Square One TV, gender, ethnicity and race*.

De Vaney, A. (1991). A grammar of educational television. In D. Hlynka & J. C. Belland (Eds.), *Paradigms regained: The uses of illuminative, semiotic and post-modern criticism as modes of inquiry in educational technology*, (pp. 241-280). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

De Vaney, A. (1993). Reading educational computer programs. In R. Mufoletto & N. Knupfer (Eds.), *Social perspectives of computers in education*, (pp. 181-196). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Department of English Language, Beijing Foreign Languages Institute. (1985). *A Chinese-English dictionary*. Beijing: Commercial Press.

Ellsworth, E. (1987). Educational films against critical pedagogy. *Journal of Education, 169*(3), 32-47.

Erickson, B. (1991). Process and meaning in the art of Xu Bing. In *Three installations by Xu Bing*, (pp. 2-32). Madison, WI: Elvehjem Museum of Art.

Fang, Z. (1990). Xi shi jian wu jie [Five interpretations of *An Analyzed Reflection of the World*]. *Jiansu huakan [Jiansu painting journal]*, 2, 17-20.

Feldman, E. B. (1972). *Varieties of visual experience: Art as image and idea*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., Publishers.

Feldman, E. B. (1991). A process for looking at and understanding. In D. Hlynka & J. C. Belland (Eds.), *Paradigms regained: The uses of illuminative, semiotic and post-modern criticism as modes of inquiry in educational technology*, (pp. 403-414). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications. (Original work published in 1970).

Fish, S. (1980). Literature in the reader: Affective stylistics. In J. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism*, (pp. 70-100). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Fish, S. (1980). Interpreting the Varioru m. In J. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism*, (pp. 164-184). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Fish, S. (1980). *Is there a text in this class: The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Fiske, J. (1987). *Television Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Gibson, W. (1980). Authors, speakers, readers, and mock readers. In Tompkins, J. P. (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism*, (pp. 1-6). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Grieder, T. (1985). A post-modern theory of art education. *Art Education, 37*, 6-8.

Ingarden, R. (1973). *The literary work of art*. (G. G. Grabowicz, trans.). Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press.

Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Iser, W. (1980). The reading process: A phenomenological approach. In J. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism*, (pp. 50-69). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Jauss, H. R. (1982). *Aesthetic experience and literary hermeneutics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Jauss, H. R. (1982). *Toward an aesthetic of reception*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Lin, S. M. (1990). Xu Bing Phenomenon. In *Xu Bing banhua zhan [Xu Bing prints exhibition]*. Taipei, Taiwan: Lung Men Art Gallery.

Ma, Y. (1993). A reader-response analysis of *A Book from the Sky*--a postmodern educational enterprise (Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 54 (9A), 3311.

Martinique, E. (1983). *Chinese traditional bookbinding: A study of its evolution and techniques*. San Francisco, CA: Chinese Materials Center.

Mailloux, S. (1982). *Interpretive conversations: The reader in the study of American fiction*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Marshall, B. K. (1992). *Teaching the postmodernism: Fiction and theory*. New York: Routledge.

Michaels, W. B. (1980). The interpreter's self: Peirce on the Cartesian "Subject." In Tompkins, J. P. (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism*, (pp. 185-200). Baltimore, MD: The Johns opkins University Press.

Miller, C. (1983). *Technical and cultural prerequisites for the invention of printing in China and the West*. San Francisco, CA: Chinese Materials Center.

Nichols, B. (1988). The work of culture in the age of cybernetic systems. Screen, *29* (1), 22-46.

Parks, M. E. (1980). Art education in a post-modern age. *Art Education*, *42*, 10-13.

Tompkins, J. P. (Ed.). (1980). *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism*. Baltimore, MD: The JohnsHopkins University Press.

Wallis, B. (Ed.). (1984). *Art after modernism: Rethinking representation*. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art.

Wallis, B. (Ed.). (1987). *Blastered allegories: An anthology of writings by contemporary artists*. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art.

Wang, L. (1989). About Xu Bing's art--Behind his success. *Chinese Fine Arts*, *22*.

Yin, J. N. (1988). *Chinese Fine Arts*, *46*.

Yin, J. N. (1989). The new world of repetition of form--Xu Bing's *The Mirror of the World--An Analyzed Reflection of the End of This Century*. *Artists*, *164*, Taiwan.

Zheng, S. L. (1983). Hanzi de tezhi [Characteristics of Chinese characters]. *Asian Culture*, *1*, 3-9.